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Scenario for a Bay of Pigs?

Even before he has had a chance to savor his massive electoral victory, President Ronald Reagan finds himself on a collision course with the Democratic majority in the House over the covert aid the United States has been giving the Contras fighting in Nicaragua.

In the Senate, the new chairman of the Intelligence Committee, Dave Durenberger, R-Minn., is telling the administration that the only way to save the arms aid to the guerrillas is to go public.

To deepen Mr. Reagan's dilemma, the influential voices of former CIA directors Richard Helms and James Schlesinger are being raised to warn that the heavy involvement of the intelligence agency in this controversial and no-longer-secret project is eroding the agency's support in Congress over the long term.

Rolling with these punches, Mr. Reagan has made it clear that he has no intention of abandoning the Contras by permanently cutting their supply lines. But he has agreed that all possible ways of assisting the guerrillas be explored to see if there are practical options other than CIA funding. Since the vote on whether to renew the CIA arms aid cannot be held until March, the administration has a month to decide on its strategy.

It is likely that few decisions in the next four years will more profoundly affect the American position in the world and Mr. Reagan's place in the history books than how he manages this enormously difficult dilemma involving the future of Central America. In their initial review of the available options, Reagan officials are finding no easy alternative solutions, and the renewal of quasi-secret CIA funding may turn out to be the only realistic way of helping the Contras.

At first glance, Mr. Durenberger's proposal to make the arms assistance available by open vote as part of the foreign aid package has the appeal of forthrightness and simplicity. But under the law, the United States can only give such military aid to duly recognized governments or international entities and the president would have to report openly to Congress within 60 days and obtain the support of both Houses.

In effect, "going public" with military aid to the Contras would require breaking relations with the Nicaraguan government and giving some kind of formal recognition to the main guerrilla group. A U.S. Congress that balks at quiet support to the Contras is not ready for a virtual declaration of war against the Sandinista regime that would eliminate the remaining possibility of negotiation, persuasion, and pressure.

Until the conclusion is reached that there is no hope of getting the Sandinistas to agree to an open society and free elections, a complete diplomatic break is premature. At present, it would not have the support of most Latin countries nor of our European allies.

If publicly voted U.S. arms aid to the Contras is a mirage, there remains the possibility that friendly third countries might be persuaded to provide the arms the U.S. Congress is reluctant to supply. In fact, one or two governments have stepped in to assist the Contras since the U.S. aid was suspended last May.

But this assistance was a stop-gap measure designed to see the Contras through to the promised renewal of U.S. aid this year. If it becomes clear that the United States is permanently terminating its aid, there is little hope that others will help when they see the United States is unwilling to protect its own vital interests.

If it turns out that CIA funding, with all its drawbacks, is the only feasible way of supplying the Contras, Reagan officials believe that the predictably disastrous conse-

quences of American withdrawal can change enough votes to save the aid. A decision to cut off the Contras would amount to a congressionally mandated Bay of Pigs and would send out the signal that the United States has again proved to be an unreliable ally.

The Sandinistas would take the U.S. pullout as a green light for a major offensive with their helicopter gunships to crush the Contras and to impose a militarized state on the Cuban pattern. The democratic opposition groups that still exist openly inside Nicaragua have consistently warned that the Contra threat is their only protection against a Sandinista crackdown.

Released from the necessity of defending its own territory from the Contra attacks, the large Sandinista army would be freed to step up the flow of arms and trained guerrillas into El Salvador and Guatemala. A very major increase in the American assistance programs to Honduras and Costa Rica would be necessary over many years to have a chance of preventing their retreat into a frightened neutrality. Aid to the Contras is cheap at the price, when the cost of its withdrawal is soberly calculated.

Finally, the Reagan administration can make a strong case that a renewal of aid to the guerrillas at this critical moment could have a dramatic impact on the Nicaraguan civil war. Symbolizing American determination to stay the course, this decision would present the Sandinistas a choice between the eventual risk of defeat or the holding of the genuinely free elections they once promised.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.